Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Social Work, Global Poverty, and Development

United Nations, Social Work Day Wrap-up Speech

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Social Work, Global Poverty, and Development

Thank you, it is a great honor to be here. I am deeply grateful to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) for this opportunity to give the wrap-up speech at this 26th Annual Social Work Day at the United Nations. I would like to give particular thanks to the organizers, Janice Wetzel of IASSW and Robin Mama of IFSW, for inviting me to be part of this great event. It is wonderful to be in a UN conference room full of social workers from around the world.

Allow me to acknowledge just a few of many social workers who have influenced my international thinking directly: Shanti Khinduka, my dean for 25 years at Washington University in St. Louis; the late Dick Parvis, an early leader in international social work and social work education at Washington University; Jim Midgley at the University of California, Berkeley, who has a very wide vision and has articulated the role of international social development; Angie Yuen, Head of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Hong Kong Polytechnic and current President of IASSW; Wang Sibin at Peking University, head of the Association of Social Workers in China (Drs. Yuen and Wang are editors of the new *China Journal of Social Work*); Gao Jianguo at Shandong University in China; colleagues at the National University of Singapore, including S. Vasoo, who created the *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, and Sudha Nair, who directs the Centre for Social Development, Asia; Bambang Laksmono at National University of Indonesia; Leila Patel at the University of Johannesburg, who directs the Centre for Social Development, Africa; Theresa Kaijage, who created Wamata for people living with HIV/AIDS in Tanzania; Vered Slonim-Nevo, at Ben Gurion University, working with both Arab and Jewish Israelis; my colleagues Li Zou, Yunju Nam, Martha Ozawa, Shanta Pandey, Gautam Yadama, Luis Zayas, and others at Washington University in St. Louis; and my former doctoral students, Alice Johnson, Min Zhan, Fred Ssewamala, Michal Grinstein-Weiss, Gina Chowa, Chang-keun Han, and others, now on faculties at University of Illinois, Columbia University, University of North Carolina, National University of Singapore, and elsewhere. Fortunately, I have learned far more from my doctoral students than I have taught them.

As with other speakers and participants here today, I have family connections at the UN. My wife's father, Thomas Sherrard, worked for the League of Nations and later UNRRA at the UN as a social worker, assisting displaced people in Asia and Europe following World War II. As a result of her father's assignments, my wife, Margaret, was born in Germany. She later became a social worker, developing into a very productive researcher and professor in immigration, social policy, and community development. After I met Margaret and her father, I also became a social worker.

When I was a bit younger, I had the opportunity to serve on a UN committee, and I recall being somewhat frustrated that people would talk at great length, and that the committee report was large and expansive, reflecting everyone's topics and views, rather than making a clear, concise point. Only later did I fully grasp that this is in fact the purpose—that people should be able to talk, instead of shoot at each other, and everyone's voice should be heard. This is the primary value of the UN, and it is precious.

The United Nations is among the most hopeful human achievements. It would be impossible to overstate this. As a social innovation, the UN is at least as remarkable as the emergence of democracy in 5th century BC Athens. The realized ideal that sovereign governments should have a forum to work out differences—however challenging and imperfect the process—has put history on a different path.

As globalization increases, it is likely that the role and contributions of the UN will continue to grow. Looking back a thousand years from now—almost impossible for us to imagine—the UN will likely be viewed as the first great step toward peaceful, democratic, and sustainable global governance and cooperation.

Global Poverty and Social Work

Today we have heard three very informative and wise presentations from exceptional speakers. I will summarize briefly, and later return to several key observations in these informative and stimulating presentations.

Shulamith Koenig, founder of the People's Movement for Human Rights Learning and global leader in human rights education, is truly impressive. Seldom do humans live a life with this degree of vision, dedication, and noteworthy achievement over an extended period of time. She is committed to achieving a new political culture based on human rights, and she organized a UN decade of human rights education (1995-2004). She well deserves the UN Prize in Human Rights (2003), one of only five Americans to receive it. The UN, of course, has provided the international framework and leadership with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Koenig and other dedicated social workers have taken the ideal of human rights and turned it into a practical tool to guide social work practice and policy.

Aaron Greenberg, a Child Protection Specialist at UNICEF, works in social protection and alternative care for children, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. He was the first director of Better Care Network, a global, interagency network to assist children who lack adequate family care. Greenberg boldly suggests that we are at the dawn of a social work revolution that will arise from growing recognition that basic social conditions are fundamental for stability and economic growth of nations and the world. Some international organizations, including the World Bank, are suggesting that it is time to establish a "global social floor" or safety net to protect highly vulnerable children and families in developing countries. UNICEF suggests that social workers play an explicit role. Greenberg urges social workers to identify, train for, and assert competence in a basic skill set—including engagement, assessment, ability to work in teams, and cultural skills—and then strategically apply this skill set in "wedges of opportunity," such as HIV/AIDS practice, to demonstrate and build professional social work. He asks us rhetorically: If we are at the dawn of a social work revolution, is social work ready?

Bernardo Kliksberg has been a major voice in Latin American youth development and social capital for many years. He has held leadership positions at the Inter-American Development Bank and is a current special advisor to UNICEF. In his remarks, Kliksberg details the extent of poverty and hardship on the planet, with 30,000 children dying each day from preventable causes, and an additional 400,000 people dying this year due to the economic crisis. He points out that millions of

lives could be saved with inexpensive interventions—e.g., mosquito nets, basic nutrition supplements—but the world is not choosing to make these investments. For perspective, Kliksberg refers us to the "wisdom of the ancients"—biblical profits, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius—as guides to social commitment.

Challenging Circumstances at the Beginning of the 21st Century

The planet as a whole, and social workers in particular, face very challenging circumstances in the 21st Century. The issues may be talked about in terms of science, technology, and economics, but they are fundamentally social.

Growing world population. The human population is expected to peak at 9 billion or more around mid-century, then begin to decline. The projected population decline is a ray of hope, but between now and then the world population will increase by 2 to 4 billion—as much as 50% larger than today. In simple numerical terms, the challenges for social workers in all areas of practice and policy will become greater and more complex with this population growth.

Aging world population. With gradually increasing life expectancy and health, the world population is rapidly becoming older. This demographic shift will have large impacts on retirement security and health systems around the world. For example, China is the most rapidly aging country, yet little social policy is in place to address the future needs of hundreds of millions of elders. In the United States, Social Security retirement and Medicare currently represent over 40% of the federal budget. While the solvency of US Social Security can be fixed with adjustments, no informed person believes that US Medicare is sustainable in its current form.

What can be done in response to aging societies? As one part of the response, it is clear that the industrial era concept of "retirement" will have to be rethought. As a step in this direction, with colleagues in China, the Center for Social Development is hosting a conference in July 2009 at Shandong University on "productive aging." Productive aging suggests that older adults should not be only passive recipients of support and care, but also—if they have the capacity and interest—engaged in society as volunteers, caregivers, and if they choose, in paid employment. It is inevitable that the world will fashion a different idea of "growing old" in the decades ahead. Social work should take the lead as societies, communities, and families rethink support and engagement of elders.

Human migration. Nation states are the building blocks of the modern world. For several hundred years policies of nations states have been largely self-contained, resting on the ideal of independence and almost complete sovereignty. As globalization increases, there are increasing strains in this arrangement among states—for example in the current economic crisis. Going forward, more international planning and cooperation will be necessary in many areas, and one of the most prominent is human migration. Fueled by a combination of global economic growth, political turmoil, and available transportation, millions of people each year, legally and illegally, are moving across borders. These population flows will likely continue to increase. The challenge for social workers is that 20th Century social policies are built on the nation state model. When people move, social rights and benefits are disrupted or lost. Just as regional and global economic solutions are necessary, we will also have to create regional and global social protections. To be concrete, in North America we now have NAFTA, but we will also require a NASPA—North American Social

Policy Agreement to provide health, retirement, and other benefits across borders. Fortunately in the European Community and other regional associations, some of these steps are now taking place, but progress is difficult and we have a very long way to go.

Global economic growth and rise of a global middle class. World economic growth will continue to move millions more people into the middle class, with middle class expectations of living standards and energy consumption. Economic growth will lead to greater environmental challenges.

Pressures on environment and natural resources. Pressures on the earth's resources will grow substantially with population pressures and economic development in the decades ahead. Resources will become more scarce. The land, air, and water on the planet will become more depleted and polluted. With global warming, we will have increasing incidence of drought, storms, and rising sea levels. The biologist Edward O. Wilson refers to the 21st Century as a "bottleneck" of population pressure that the world will have to pass through. Professional social workers today will carry out their work in the squeeze of this bottleneck.

Quite likely this will require much stronger relationships between social work practice and the natural environment than we have seen in the past. As children of the Enlightenment, we tend to think that science and technology can solve all problems, but we should bear in mind that science and technology have given us the cars, airplanes, air conditioners, and computers that are creating the environmental crisis. Although discussed in scientific and technical terms, environmental challenges are fundamentally social. Humans will have to work together to solve pollution and resource problems. Only renewed international institutions, including the United Nations, will be able to address global environmental challenges successfully.

Shortages of natural resources and food production. In 2008, with a rapid rise in the price of oil, the planet fell into a crisis with a rapid rise in the price of oil and food (because the cost of food in modern agriculture is closely tied to the cost of energy). With the world in an economic recession in 2009, the crisis in energy and food has eased, but there will be cost pressures going forward when economic growth returns. Major humanitarian problems will arise, and during periods of food shortages, there will be social and political instability. In the poorest countries, instability means loss of homes, livelihoods, and lives. Social work should do everything possible to create the "basic social floor" mentioned by Aaron Greenberg, a floor that can mitigate food crises and reduce negative impacts of social and political upheavals.

Shifting political power and influence. This brings us to the challenge of global management and governance. The United States has endured a period of damaged international reputation and influence, now perhaps being healed by a more international and cooperative Obama administration. The rigid stance of United States political dominance will now give way to recognition of more widespread political power. The distribution of power and influence will be more complex, and has to be managed by social institutions. In the 21st Century, principles and practices of the United Nations will be needed far more than in the 20th.

Shifting economic power. The current financial and economic crisis will accelerate a trend toward rising economic power in China and India. Dominance of the US in economic decision-making, and the US dollar as a reserve currency, will decline. In many ways, this is a welcome change, but global risks for instability will have to be managed.

Inadequate financial architecture, and fragile macroeconomic conditions. With increasing globalization of economic life—augmented by a rapid revolution in information technology—it is apparent that the existing global financial architecture is leading to financial crises, rapid currency fluctuations, trade distortions, price swings, and periodic economic declines, resulting in enormous human and social problems.

The Global Financial and Economic Crisis

Despite massive government interventions around the world, the current economic crisis is likely to be the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It is truly global; every country is affected.

There are serious threats to nutrition, health, and survival of millions of people, especially in Africa. As Bernardo Kliksberg points out, an estimated 400,000 additional people will die per year. While those of us in comfortable circumstances may worry over the smaller balances in our retirement accounts, or reduced endowments of our institutions, the poorest people in the world are starving, falling ill, and too often dying. Economic crises are not merely lines on a chart. They are a kind of violence.

Yet few global leaders are talking about this. Perhaps never before has a response to economic crisis been so oriented toward financial elites, who created the crisis, with almost total neglect for people at the bottom, who are paying the price.

The almost exclusive response of the United States, and the G20 in general, in supporting the banks is a product of faulty reasoning and faulty morals.

The faulty reasoning is that the banks must be patched up and supported in their current form, often with current leadership. But banks in their current form are the source of the problem. In this approach, capitalists are being protected despite taking wild risks. This is not how capitalism is supposed to work. Losers are supposed to lose. The current policy approach is maintaining incentives for imprudent risk, and maintaining incompetent management. Even if this policy is successful in the short term, it sets the stage for repetition of similar problems going forward.

And faulty morals: In the current approach, irresponsible and failed financial firms are being subsidized by the rest of society, while at the same time the poorest people in every country are suffering unemployment, loss of homes, disintegrating communities, hunger, severe stress, and sometimes death.

What should have been done, and still should be done? Insolvent banks should be taken over by governments and reorganized—with investors taking all their losses—and then resold to the private sector in healthy form. At the same time, the trillions of dollars that have been funneled to the banks should instead have been invested to support the poorest households to maintain basic nutrition and health, stability of homes and families, and functioning of neighborhoods and communities.

Why do we not hear more about this? Where are the voices of social workers?

Toward Social Development

Social work practice has several major organizing themes. For simplicity, I will list four. Each serves a somewhat different purpose and all have honorable histories and notable achievements.

The most fundamental theme is *basic needs and problem solving*, in the social work tradition of caring, assistance, and response to difficulties. This is the foundation and core of the social work profession, and we should all be enormously proud to serve people and society in this way.

A second organizing theme is *social justice*, or fairness, in the social work tradition of advocacy on behalf of the poor and powerless, and challenging economic and political elites. There are particular times when social justice actions are particularly productive, though too often the social justice theme takes the form of ineffectual rhetoric rather than serving as a guide to constructive action.

A third organizing theme of social work, somewhat related to social justice though more fundamental, is *human rights*. Of course, human rights is a pillar in the history and mission of the United Nations, and can be a very practical and effective tool. As Shula Koenig has demonstrated in her exemplary career, human rights can be the organizing framework for all of social work practice. In India, for example, specification of human rights is used as a guide for defining social protections and political actions, such as the right to shelter leading to protections for street people to set up temporary dwellings without being beaten by the police. The potential of the human rights approach is great, but as yet underutilized by social workers in most countries, including the United States.

A fourth major theme is *social development*. Social development looks beyond problems and deficiencies, beyond justice, and even beyond rights. In the influential framework of Amartya Sen, social development focuses on increasing "capabilities," meaning that people—and communities and institutions—should be able to *reach their potential to be and do*. In the social development theme of social work, we aim for people to be healthy and educated, and as productive and engaged as possible, because this is good for them and good for all of us.

Center for Social Development

Much like the human rights approach, social development sounds idealistic, but can be very practical. To take one example from our work at the Center for Social Development (CSD) at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University, we have engaged in two decades of theory, applied research, and policy innovations in *asset building*. Asset building refers to enabling families not only to have sufficient income, but also to build a base of assets to invest for their security and to achieve life goals, such as investments in education, home ownership, business capitalization, life enrichment, and eventually retirement security.

This practical form of asset building is progressive savings. My original proposal was that everyone should have an Individual Development Account (IDA) beginning as early as birth and lasting throughout a lifetime, with matched savings and greater public subsidies for the poor. This concept has been put in place in demonstration programs with impoverished populations in the United States, Canada, Australia, Korea, Uganda, Hungary, and other countries.

Margaret and I recently returned from visiting a successful matched savings project (influenced by IDAs) with indigenous women in the Andean highlands of Peru. CSD is now discussing plans for research with Peruvian colleagues, and there are policy plans to expand this project to several other countries in Latin America.

With Chinese colleagues, CSD has studied a local government innovation in asset-building in the western Xinjiang region. Documented success in that project has led to adoption of similar policies in several other provinces in China.

In Australia, ANZ Bank has created Savers Plus, with a special initiative to reach indigenous populations with progressive saving and financial education.

The idea of giving all children an account, with progressive funding, has now been implemented in the social policies of the United Kingdom and Singapore, and with somewhat lesser coverage in the policies of Canada and South Korea. Other projects are testing children and youth accounts in Uganda, Hong Kong, and Taipei.

In Uganda, my former doctoral student Fred Ssewamala has implemented matched savings with HIV/AIDS orphans. Savings are used to support secondary education, which prevents the children from living on the street and reduces their own risk of contracting HIV. Documented success in a pilot project has led to an expansion of this project with support of the US National Institutes of Health.

Research has informed all of these developments, and in most instances, continuing innovations are accompanied by new research. Our experience is that research evidence is powerful and influential. Contrary to the stereotype that social research reports "collect dust on shelves," we find that research results immediately inform policy discussion, design, and practice. There could be no better description of "evidence-based practice."

A key to success in application of research knowledge is to ask questions about relevant topics, in a specified manner, so that findings have clear implications for application, and are therefore welcomed by policy makers and practitioners.

CSD also creates forums that bring together researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. CSD and our partners have planned and hosted several international conferences on inclusive asset building—most recently an International Conference in Singapore in 2007 on "Saving, Asset Building, and Financial Inclusion," sponsored by Citigroup Foundation and others. This meeting brought together global leadership in asset-based social policy, microfinance, and commercial financial services. It was the first meeting of its kind and productive in breaking down barriers across these sectors that have overlapping goals in asset building by the poor.

CSD and other partners are now planning to test Child Development Accounts in four developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Planning support is from MasterCard Foundation. In this project, as in all others, CSD will be responsible for research.

The larger vision is to create and implement progressive Child Development Accounts for all children on the planet.

While this also may sound idealistic, rapid advancements in information technology and the extension of the internet into impoverished areas all over the world—primarily via cell phone—will create the technical capability to deliver an account to every child. Huge barriers in political will and economic support will remain, but without a vision of universal and progressive asset building, it will be impossible to get there.

And this is only a part of the larger goal of universal access to safe and efficient financial services of all kinds: transactions, remittances, depositing, credit, and insurance.

The example of asset building is only one area of social development research, policy, and practice. Social workers will continue to identify other key leverage points. Education, particularly education for girls, is one of these. Basic public health and disease prevention, such as the mosquito nets mentioned by Bernardo Kliksberg, is another. Legal identity is another key leverage point in social development, which I will come back to in a moment.

In addition to innovations for individuals, families, and communities, a social development perspective has implications for social work's response to the large global challenges outlined above. As we have noted, these essentially *social* challenges require planned and purposeful *work*. The name of our profession could not be more appropriate. We can hope that a reinvigorated understanding of the words *social* and *work* will lead to renewed vision, organization, and efficacy of *social work* in the 21st Century.

Strategies and Pathways

How should we proceed? This is a very large question, but I have a few suggestions:

Embrace social work history, draw on our roots. About a decade ago I was picked up at the airport in London for a speaking engagement and taken to Toynbee Hall. No venue could have made me happier. Toynbee Hall is where Jane Addams learned about settlement house work, and later returned to the United States to found Hull House. The women of Hull House used applied research to address dozens of social challenges in safety, justice, public health, and working conditions. This was by far the most fertile and productive group in American social work. Yes, we revere these women, but we should also ask: Where is the next Jane Addams, and how do we create her—or better, a dozen of her? Where is the equivalent of Toynbee Hall and Hull House for International Social Work?

Affirm social work. As noted above, major challenges are fundamentally social issues. We cannot ignore the reality that humans are social animals, with particular capacities and potential, as well as evolutionary and cultural baggage that sometimes gets in the way of constructive action. We humans have our limitations, but we try to work together. We create organizations and institutions intended to get things done and solve problems. None of this is ever easy. It always requires work.

Professionalize social work. A major point in Aaron Greenberg's remarks is the challenge to professionalize social work, perhaps especially in developing countries. Too often, social work is viewed as activities that do not require knowledge, standards, or training, and should often be voluntary. Bernardo Kliksberg suggests that we turn to the "wisdom of the ancients" in philosophy

and religion to guide our values and good works. Indeed, we honor these values and lessons of great teachers of the past, but values and dedication are not enough. Social workers must be trained to use research evidence, practice as professionals, and be compensated at a reasonable level so that talented people will continue to do this hard work over a long period of time.

Move beyond general meetings to focus on particular issues. International social work should identify key areas of research, policy, and practice, and move decisively toward substantive agendas with dedicated action and research. These agendas could be in key areas such as livelihoods, health, education, financial services, social protection, or disaster response. IASSW and IFSW, as well as the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD), hold international meetings that must serve multiple purposes. But in conjunction with—or in addition to—general meetings, international social work organizations should focus on particular challenges, advancing social work's engagement and efficacy, and making social work's contributions clearly visible.

One way to focus would be to have a long-term agenda to accomplish a major social goal across all nations—in the same way, for example, that public health might attempt to eradicate a major disease.

One Proposal for 21st Century Social Work: Legal Identity for Every Child

As we meet at the UN today, President Obama is in Turkey building more positive ties in a critical region of the world, and a few days ago he was in Russia, where he proposed that nuclear weapons should be eliminated from the earth. This proposal is highly idealistic—beyond audacious—but the President is right to say it. Nuclear weapons are unimaginably dangerous. No rational person would ever want another one to go off. Only by saying that they should be eliminated do we have a chance to achieve this goal.

In social work, I can think of at least one similar bold statement of leadership. At the 1909 White House Conference on Children, social workers decided that dependent children should no longer be in institutional care. This decision came at a time when institutional care of children and youth in orphanages and other facilities had soared. The statement was idealistic, and seemingly unlikely to be achieved, but it set in motion a series of policy changes for Mother's Aid and "outdoor relief" that drastically reduced institutional care of children and youth in the 20th Century.

Today I have a proposal for international social work: Every child on the planet should be given a legal identity at birth.

Legal identity—in the form of a birth certificate issued by the state—is the most fundamental human right. It is the right to officially exist. Without legal identity, it is problematic—sometimes impossible—to access immunizations and other health services, education, financial services, formal employment, and many other rights, protections, and opportunities offered or regulated by the state.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said when she introduced the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* at the UN in 1948, human rights begin in small places and close to home. Unless these rights have meaning for every child in every home, they have little meaning anywhere.

Today, about 36% of all children are born without legal identity. Officially, they do not exist. In less developed countries the total is 71%. In seven less developed countries, the total is over 90%. Regionally, the largest proportions are in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Unregistered births are strongly associated with poverty, but even in industrialized countries the figure is not zero, but 2%.

It is altogether fitting to make this proposal at the United Nations. No other international organization has been such a bulwark for human rights, and on the issue of legal identity, the UN is among the few organizations that have done any substantial work. The 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* explicitly identifies legal identity as a human right for all children. UNICEF has monitored rates of birth certification and spurred initiatives to register more children.

To be sure, legal identify for all children is idealistic. But if President Obama can propose getting rid of all nuclear weapons, then social workers can propose giving all children a birth certificate.

Let us be a little bold, and take up an issue that would have huge positive effects on social and economic well-being, not to mention active citizenship and political voice, yet at the same time is starkly simple and measureable. Legal identity for all is an important, clear, and achievable goal for the planet.

With rapid improvements in information technology, this goal will be achievable before the middle of the 21st Century, and no profession is better suited or better situated than social work to take up this challenge and achieve this goal.

Of course, for social workers, identity would be only the beginning. Once all children have an official existence, this would create leverage to make real and meaningful the "rights of the child" around the world. Some social workers would focus on immunizations and health care, and some on nutrition. Others would focus on protection from violence, and still others on access to education. My goal in this larger effort would be to put in place a savings account for all children (ideally invested in an index of hard currencies) to support their future education and livelihoods. All of these social development agendas would become possible and more successful with legal identity.

Thank you very much. It is an incredible honor for me to be with you on this day.

My heartfelt best wishes to each of you.